6-1-1994

Theology, News and Notes - Vol. 41, No. 02

Fuller Theological Seminary

William E. Pannell

Richard J. Mouw

John C. Ortberg

THEOLOGY, NEWS AND NOTES

MEMORABLE MESSAGES

"And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?"

ROMANS 10:14 (RSV)

FULLER
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

JUNE 1994

Table of Contents

Published for the Fuller Theological Seminary Alumni/ae, June 1994
Volume 41/Number 2 USPS627220

Managing Editor: Janice E. Ryder
Editor: Esther Brinkley

A publication of Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California 91182. Published four times a year in March, June, October and December. Second-class postage paid at Pasadena, California.

Postmaster: Send change of address to Fuller Theological Seminary, 135 N. Oakland Ave., Pasadena, CA 91182.

INTRODUCTION

Preaching and Pew Rights

BY WILLIAM E. PANNELL

Not too long ago it seemed as if the powers that defined theological education had concluded that preaching had become obsolete. The church, according to this strand of wisdom, had outgrown this form of communication. Indeed, both the church and the people it was called upon to serve required something more basic—something that would really speak to their condition. The options ranged all the way from the streets to the couch. In the streets were those millions of marching feet propelling bodies against the ramparts of a thousand and one injustices. Words were important during those times, from Berkeley to Boston, but they weren't the words used by the church. Action was the proper mode; exegesis was obsolete. With the flowering of the therapeutic society, what people really needed—the salvation which they craved—was not to be found in the churches. New prophets had arisen to fill the insatiable need for counseling, and by the late sixties, preaching had been eclipsed by this art form. For many, theology had been replaced by psychology. The church, meanwhile, slept through this change, in large part because so much of its preaching was sleep-inducing.

There were voices out there trying to correct the situation. The late Dr. Karl Menninger was one of them. While lamenting the sad shape many pastors were in personally, he reserved his greatest sadness for pastors whose regard for the preaching task had eroded so far as to render them without power in the pulpit or in the larger society. "We know," he wrote, "that the principal leadership in the morality realm should be the clergy, but they seem to minimize their great traditional and historical opportunity to preach, to prophesy, to speak out. . . . Some clergymen prefer pastoral counseling of individuals to the pulpit function. But the latter is a greater opportunity to both heal *and prevent* [italics his]. . . . Clergymen have a golden

"Preach! Tell it like it is. Say it from the pulpit. Cry it from the housetops. . . . Cry comfort, cry repentance, cry hope."

opportunity to prevent some of the accumulated misapprehensions, guilt, aggressive action, and other roots of later mental suffering and mental disease. How? Preach! Tell it like it is. Say it from the pulpit. Cry it from the housetops. What shall we cry? Cry comfort, cry repentance, cry hope. Because recognition of our part in the world's transgression is the only remaining hope."[1]

That was one voice crying in the wilderness of churchly and ecclesiastical fashion. I do not know how it was received in preaching departments across the land because I had not yet ascended to the halls of academe. In the early seventies, I was an itinerant evangelist, a preacher, and I had little doubt about the place of preaching in the life of the church and its evangelistic outreach. I was not alone, of course. By then many people, Christians and nonbelievers alike, had had their lives changed by the power of the Word *spoken*. By the early sixties, the country had been powerfully affected by two preachers—two Southern Baptist preachers, one black and the other white—who had, between them, set the parameters of public discourse in the nation. Billy Graham, the evangelist. Martin Luther King, Jr., the prophet. Both of them, preachers. Together, though on many issues far apart, they had shaped the meaning of Christianity in the minds of millions of people worldwide. They did it by preaching. One of them added a little marching to his repertoire.

America has always listened to preachers. If Page Smith is right when he asserts that the country was conceived by dreams and that the dreams were then spoken into being, those words were not just the words of politicians or statesmen. In a more profound sense, they were the Word spoken by preachers and by theologians who could preach. This shaping of a people through preaching was possible because there was an expectancy abroad that when clergy spoke, they spoke God's Word. There was a certain resonance in the culture that responded to this preachment that formed the sounding board for the preacher.

Preaching, to be validated, needs an audience, a people who hear. "How shall they *hear* without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14). This is true whether one refers to the broader secular society or that smaller society called church. I recall a columnist for the *Detroit News* writing about the power of preaching. It was not his usual topic, but he had just returned from a public rally in that racially torn city. The speaker was Martin Luther King, Jr., and the journalist had been profoundly moved. He concluded his column with words

The sermons which comprise this issue bear the mark of this strange combination of speaking and *listening, of writing* for *preaching, of hearing* before *composition.*

to this effect: "I have always thought that the experience of the day was what church should be, and if there was preaching like that in the churches, there would be fewer of us who could stay away."

So the challenge for the preacher is not a simple matter of good homiletics and delivery. It may be that the first consideration should be to the audience. Those who listen are not just there for the preacher. They are part of the act of preaching. They are not simply receptors; they bring to the encounter all the stuff that makes preaching necessary and possible. And many of those listeners know more theology than preachers allow.

I recall a seminarian who approached me about his class in theology. His professor was a world-renowned scholar whose theology was off the charts on the liberal side. "What should I do with this man's theology?" he asked. Not brimming over with style that day, I told him, "Nothing. There is no music to it, and it won't dance. Get the work done, pass the man's class, and then go back to your congregation and they'll save you from that mess." I smiled of course, but he caught the seriousness of my intention. He knew then that I knew something about his tradition. He knew that I knew that his congregation would not allow him to flounder too long on the shoals of bad theology, 'cause they would talk back. They would help him preach. He could trust them every Sunday morning to make him a better preacher than the one he was on Saturday night.

To raise the question, What's the greatest sermon you ever heard? is to raise a profound question about how different people at different times and places hear. I am impressed by Roger E. Van Harn's insight about the expectations people had when they came to the synagogue and heard the young rabbi, Jesus. Van Harn observes that "before Jesus began to preach, those who attended the synagogue regularly had some pretty strong ideas about what they were likely to hear. They were familiar with the way 'sermons' went in the synagogue." Van Harn is right when he argues that Jesus' sermon set them on their collective ears that day when he placed Israel's future hopes in the present moment.

Funny how a simple word like "now" or "today" can get a preacher run out of town! Van

Harn's book, titled *Pew Rights*, is subtitled, *For People Who Listen to Sermons*. Here, then, may be the beckoning frontier for the great tradition of preaching. We may be about to recognize that preaching and listening are inseparable and indispensable, complementary and potentially explosive. What's the best sermon you ever heard? is the flip side of another question, one addressed to the preacher: When was the last time you took an audience seriously?

The sermons which comprise this issue bear the mark of this strange combination of speaking *and* listening, of writing *for* preaching, of hearing *before* composition. There is a mystery in all of this, and we invite you to share in it. These sermons were preached recently in the chapel services at Fuller Seminary—a mere selection of an outstanding preaching tradition carried on here at Fuller. ■

ENDNOTE

1. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973.

WILLIAM E. PANNELL, D.D., is the Arthur DeKruyter/Christ Church Oak Brook Professor of Preaching and Dean of the Chapel of Fuller Theological Seminary. His most recent works include *Evangelism from the Bottom Up* and *The Coming Race War: A Cry for Reconciliation.*

HEBREWS 4:14–5:10

He Was No Angel

BY RICHARD J. MOUW

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession" (Hebrews 4:14, *NRSV*).

Hebrews 4:14 concludes an argument set forth by the previous chapters of this epistle. The first two chapters detail the immense journey that Jesus, the "great high priest," has taken. Special stress is laid on the point from which he started, in view of where he arrived.

He was God of God. Light from light. True God from true God. Begotten, not made. . . . He was no angel!

Chapter 1 emphasizes the fact that Jesus' journey started in the highest heavens. In effect, the argument of the first chapter is this: *Jesus was no angel.* It seems that the congregations addressed by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews included some Jewish converts who were struggling with the idea of the full divinity of Jesus Christ. They wanted an exalted Jesus. They wanted an inestimable messiah who called forth supreme adoration. But what was laudable about a high priest who was also God? Such a notion was difficult for the Jewish imagination to grasp, especially given the Jewish sense of the radical distinction to be drawn between Creator and creature. Evidently, some early church communicants were suggesting that Jesus, our great high priest, was merely the most exalted of angels.

In defense of an orthodox faith in this Jesus, the first chapter of Hebrews launches an argument that reads like a series of one-liners. You want an angel? *This was no angel.*

Would God say this to an angel? *You are my son. Today have I begotten you.* Is that the protocol for addressing angels? Would you say this to an angel? *Let all God's angels worship him.* Can you image saying this to an angel? *The heavens are the work of your hands.* What about God saying to an angel: *Come and sit at my right hand.* This was no angel!

It is important for us to be aware of all the angelic traffic scurrying through the heavens. Recently, *Time* magazine ran a cover story on angels. I was well prepared for it, having just read Sophie Burnham's best-selling book on angelic visitors. The American public seems well aware of, if not preoccupied with, the fact that there are a lot of angels around, bustling about in the heavens and visiting the earth. In pop culture and in all manner of entertainment media, people are returning from heaven. Superman is wandering around someplace in the heavens, awaiting a timely return. Territorial spirits hover over us. We have seen the tabloids, or have at least glanced at them while waiting in line at Ralph's or Seven-Eleven. Alien beings journey into our atmosphere, visit us, and even experiment on us. The extraterrestrial freeways are jammed with angelic and nonangelic traffic. But theirs is a business trip very different from the journey depicted in Hebrews. ET never traveled the path Jesus trod. Our alien visitors, our *Time* magazine angels, the people who manifest at deathbeds in the broken homes of Sophie Burnham's narratives, the ghost that appears in Whoopie Goldberg's movie, the angel atop every Mormon Temple—none of these pop cultic heroes has embarked on the profound course of Jesus' life journey. "He came from the *highest* heavens," even from beyond the reach or realm of angels. The Son of God was no angel! We sing it in the familiar worship anthem:

"Crown him with many
crowns. . . .
Let angels prostrate fall.
Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown him Lord of all!"

"He came from the *highest* heavens." This is the central thrust of this epistle.

On May 1, 1987, in the sports stadium of Cologne, Germany, a beatification ceremony was held for a Carmelite nun who was known among her sisters as Sister Theresa Benedicta of the Cross. The Nazis had gassed and killed this sister at Auschwitz in August 1942. The 1987 ceremony of beatification was a first step toward declaring Sister Theresa a saint.

I need not wait for our sister's canonization. She is for me already a beloved saint. She was born Edith Stein, a Jew. She was well schooled, and she developed into a brilliant young philosopher in Germany. Her mentors were the upper crust of academe. She was also an avowed atheist—that is, until one day she encountered Jesus Christ and fell passionately in love with him. She was then baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. Following baptism, she soon felt God's call to enter a Carmelite cloister, an initiation which meant she would never return to the "ordinary" world of affairs. Having felt the call, and having had it confirmed by a Carmelite community, she went home for a farewell weekend with her Jewish family. It was during the Feast of Tabernacles. She visited her synagogue for the last time. On the following morning at eight o'clock, she would travel by train to enter the cloister—one leg of the journey for this saint. Like Jesus, she was no angel. She rode on trains and she conversed with her family. I want to highlight one of her farewell conversations:

She walked home from the synagogue with the 84-year-old Jewish mother whom she was bidding good-bye. There was a painful silence until her mother finally said, haltingly, "Wasn't it a beautiful sermon that we heard this morning at the synagogue?"

There is nothing that we can say to the one who sits on heaven's highest throne that he hasn't already experienced himself.

"Yes, mother," Edith Stein returned.

"Isn't it possible to be a devout Jew also?"

"Yes, mother," Edith said again, "if one has not come to know anything else, it is possible to be a devout Jew."

Then, with desperation in her voice, the aged Jewish mother said, "Well, why did you have to come to know it? I don't want to say anything against him. He may have been a very good man. But why did he have to make himself into God?"

Edith Stein had no way of explaining that she had not discovered someone who made himself *into* God, but rather she had encountered the one who *was* God—the one who had come from heaven's highest throne to become a human being like us. He had made the journey in order to share in our weaknesses, our trials, and our temptations. He came to take upon himself the deepest agonies of our human condition.

The old Jewish mother's question, Why did he have to make himself into God? was the very issue and struggle that led to the great formulation at Nicea. There were communicants of the early church who, like Edith Stein's mother, said, "He must have been a very good man—indeed, a very exalted man—perhaps even an angel. Yes, even an exalted angel! We'll place him very high in the heavenly regions."

Ultimately, in this scheme of interpretation, Jesus was treated as having a substance *other than (heterousia)* the substance of God. A revisionist party came along and said, "Well, *heterousia* may carry overly negative connotations. Let's just say he had a substance *similar to (homoiousia)* that of the Father." When they gathered at Nicea to consider both options, they declared, "*Heterousia*? No. *Homoiousia*? No. But *homoousia* (of the *same* substance with the Father)! Yes!"

We are the legatees of this great declaration. He was God of God. Light from light. True God from true God. Begotten, not made. Of the same essence with the Father. Through him all things were made, for us and our salvation. It was he who came down from heaven.

He was no angel!

This "Light from light" whom we worship is no angel. And he did not come to minister to angels. Verses 16 through 18 of chapter 2 say this: "For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he

might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." Immediately following today's text, we read, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." He did not come to minister to angels. He entered our realm of existence, which is lower than that of the angels. He came to minister to us, in all of the depths, in all of the agonies, in all of the complexities of being human. He was no angel. Nor was his mission a ministry to angels.

What a journey! From heaven's highest throne to the depths of human contradiction and dilemma! Here is a high priest who has passed through the heavens. But we shouldn't let our language or our perceptions lapse into ambiguous or abstracted reflection on this significant event. The point is not simply that there *exists* a high priest, but that we *have* a high priest who has passed through the heavens. This is a person, an event, and a saving message for us. This is no "Ripley's-Believe-it-or-Not" wonder man. Nor is his story a hot one for the *National Enquirer.* (Publications like that are more inclined to print the strange-but-true fact that some Kansas farmer once grew a squash that looked just like Rudolph Bultmann.) The Jesus event, the word from heaven, is a true story about *us. We* have a great high priest who for our sakes has passed through the heavens! It was for *us* that he made the immense journey. Because of the long and arduous journey our Lord undertook, *we* have the assurance that no matter what the depths of our current struggles, they are never out of the grasp of Jesus' experience.

Years ago, as a student at a seminary in Holland, Michigan, I took part in a fall retreat led by Robert Munger. I'll never forget the talks he gave. His were revolutionary thoughts for me. He said: "Very often we act as if we have to get pious before we can pray. If we are in a bad mood, depressed, or irritable, we don't dare pray, because praying

We need to be grounded in the firm conviction that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens.

when we feel out of sorts is unthinkable." Munger was the first person to enlighten me about the truth of our need. We need to come into the presence of God and frankly express our moods, our hearts. The moody prayer may be the most efficacious offering of that day. "Lord, I feel rotten. Lord, I'm doubting today. I'm too worried about writing this paper to open my mouth, relax my jaw, and sing praises to you today." Pouring out the heart is a profound offering to our great high priest.

Our theological basis is this: There is nothing that we can say to the one who sits on heaven's highest throne that he hasn't already experienced himself. He has suffered in every way that we have suffered. He's known every weakness that we know. He has been tempted in every way that we have been tempted. He knows what it means to feel moody. He knows what it's like to be at the end of our ropes.

I've learned a lot about soul-fraught prayer from slave theology. Reflecting on Martin Luther King's birthday and preparing my heart for African-American history reflections, I reread that marvelous book by the black theologian James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues.* He sifts through the erudite theology which undergirds the spirituals. He demonstrates how spirituals cast the mold for the foundations of black theology. Slave communities in the United States spelled out theology in song. Slaves were profoundly in touch with the existential need for our high priest to have passed through the heavens, for one of our own soul mates to have suffered with us:

"Jesus walked this lonesome valley.
He had to walk it by himself.
Nobody else could walk it for him."
"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus."

These masterpieces of art and human expression eloquently depict trust in the God who has come among us as a great high priest, to identify with us, to wrestle with our self-contradictions, to bear our sense of injustice and shame.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. Therefore, let us boldly approach the throne of grace. Look how the text concludes: "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, . . . let us hold fast to our confession." When I gave my installation address, I described Fuller Seminary as the *restless* seminary—the seminary on the move, the seminary of people pawing at the ground, eager to go. I believe what I said, and I celebrate Fuller's impulse and energy. It exudes life. This is not the year to preach on standing fast. I'm glad this text talks about *holding* fast, because you can hold fast while you are on the move. If the text offered another image, I'd preach it. But the hand image, *holding* fast, seems much more relevant than the foot image, *standing* fast.

Sisters and brothers of Fuller Seminary, at this time in the year, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, and he is faithful. His faithfulness is the emphasis of chapter 3. He was faithful in the arduous task, the long journey. In the same way that he was faithful while he was on the move, let us hold fast to our confession while we are on the move as a seminary, from week to week, quarter to quarter.

School of Theology, what a marvelous revelation we have been given from God. We are invited into exploration of a rich and complex treasury of divine truth. We are commissioned explorers. But we don't explore out of vain inclination toward idle speculation. We do not conduct analyses out of a sense of calling to exposit myths and legends and stories of human manufacture. We embark on a courageous and crucial reflection in our scholarly explorations. We are a community committed to training men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his Church. In this endeavor, this journey, we need to be grounded in the firm conviction that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. As a theological community, let us hold fast to our confession.

As a theological institution committed to integrating the psychological dimensions of being human, we are, in the School of Psychology, navigating in uncharted waters. Not many have been able to agree on undertaking the task of exploring human issues from both theological and psychological perspectives. I believe we can work in both dimensions with confidence that there is no murky corner of human consciousness that lurks in the shadows beyond the eye of the one who sits on the throne. There is not the minutest element of our psychophysical nature that is unfamiliar to the God who came from heaven's throne, who took our nature upon himself. The School of Psychology has license and potential to probe it all

In the same way that he was faithful while he was on the move, let us hold fast to our confession while we are on the move.

because he, our great high priest, has been and is among us. Let us hold fast to our confession.

School of World Mission, think about the expanse of the heavens. If our great high priest traveled as far as he did, crossing immeasurable boundaries, how dare we limit our own journeys? We have been given a commission to carry the gospel into all nations, in the name of the one who left the comfort and security of heaven's throne to enter into complex, trying, and painful situations. School of World Mission, let us hold fast to our confession. For all of us—whether students, faculty, staff, administrators, friends, visitors, or alumni/ae—all of us involved in the immense commission and ministry of Fuller Theological Seminary, let us hold fast to our confession. We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens.

There may be some of us these days for whom holding fast is nearly impossible. Many of the people in our own high-energy community are barely able to get a grip and hang on. I won't go into the details of these situations. But I do want to say this to the weary and fainthearted: Whatever you're struggling with, whatever fear, whatever worry, whatever insurmountable challenge, whatever grief, whatever sadness, whatever brokenness, whatever trap of temptation is plaguing you today, Jesus our Lord has been there. We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens and entered into our own weakness. In some struggles, he might utter little more than a groan, but a deep groan. He's been there with sighs and moans too deep for words. And he did not come all that way in order to let you go. Or, in the words of one gospel song, "He didn't bring us this far to leave us." If you are having a hard time holding fast, I have a word of hope for you: He will hold you fast.

"Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, . . . let us hold fast to our confession." ■

RICHARD J. MOUW, Ph.D., is president of Fuller Theological Seminary. A renowned philosopher, scholar, and author, he has witten a number of books. Among them are *Uncommon Decency, Pluralisms and Horizons,* and *The God Who Commands.*

EXODUS 3:1-15

Old Faithful

BY JOHN C. ORTBERG

One of the most profound statements about the human condition I have ever heard came from one of the dominant figures of my life when I was about five years old. If he said it once, he said it a hundred times. Sometimes he would say it to other people, but most often he would say it to himself.

It was a rather enigmatic statement. It did not admit only one interpretation, and minds far better than mine have tried to exegete its subtleties for a long time. It could be taken as a statement of self-knowledge or even self-esteem, but I have come to believe that behind this statement is a kind of sadness, a kind of fatalistic resignation.

It is a note of caution: Don't expect too much; don't get your hopes up.

At any rate, whatever he meant by it, when he was confused, when he was challenged, when someone disapproved of him, when he had made a mistake, or when he wanted an excuse not to have to do something, this figure would reflectively puff on his pipe and observe, "I am what I am."

He was not a sophisticated guy, Popeye the Sailor Man. He had never been in therapy, so far as we know. He was not a Freudian or a Jungian. He was sadly out of touch with his "shadow self" and his "inner child." He was not an educated guy. He could not boast of a Ph.D. He certainly could not be admitted to Fuller Theological Seminary! He was a simple, pipe-smoking, tattoo-wearing, seafaring sailor man who loved Olive Oil and wanted to marry her. He didn't even have a last name, just Popeye the Sailor Man.

"I am what I am," he said. And so far as we know, that's what he was. He had no secrets. I occasionally wonder about the real story behind the origin of Sweetpea, because we never really know where Sweetpea came from. But by and large, it's true: "I am what I am," he said.

Moses thought to himself, I will go see this strange sight, this bush that does not burn up. And when the Lord saw that Moses had gone to look, God said, "Moses, do not come any closer. Moses, take off your shoes. You're on holy ground." God said, "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out. I am concerned for their suffering. So I have come down." In one of the most amazing statements in all of Scripture, God said, "So I have come down"—to rescue my people, to bring them up out of that land, up into a good and spacious land.

Faith is a by-product of knowing. The only way to grow in faith is to get to know God, because God is faithful.

God says to Moses, "So now, go. I'm sending you. Go to Pharaoh and bring my people up out of Egypt."

And Moses says, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh?" Moses says, "Who am I to bring your people out of Egypt?" Moses says, "What if the people won't listen to me?" Moses says, "I'm slow of speech and slow of tongue." Moses says, "Here am I, send Aaron." Moses says, "I am what I am. Don't get your hopes up."

And God says, "I know who you are, and it doesn't matter, frankly, because I will be with you. Your limitations, your shortcomings, your fallenness, are no longer the ultimate truth about you. You 'am' what you 'am,' but you 'am' not yet what you shall be. I shall be with you." God says.

To which Moses replies, "Who are you?" He says, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and I tell them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What's his name?' What do I tell them?"

Now you understand that when Moses is asking for a name, he is not simply asking for a label by which God is to be identified, not just for a piece of information. At least one aspect of what is going on here is that Moses is asking about the character of God, about God's intentions toward his people. He is asking, Can God be trusted? Is he good? I know who he was supposed to have been to the fathers, but what will he be to me? It brings Moses to the crisis of faith. Where will he put his basic trust?

Several years ago my wife got an unusual birthday present for me. She gave me a ride in a hot air balloon. I had never been in a hot air balloon before. We went to the appointed location and met one other couple that got into the basket with us. We chatted about our jobs and families, and then we began to rise 1,000 feet in the air. It was beautiful. It was majestic. But I experienced one other emotion that I had not really anticipated experiencing. Anybody want to guess?

Terror! Sheer terror! The basket only went up about shin high. (I had always thought they went up to one's shoulders.) One good lurch and you would be out of there! So I was holding on to the ropes as tightly as I could, terrified, the most scared person in the basket—until I looked at my wife and I saw she was even more frightened than I was. I could tell because I said, "Nancy, look behind you at that horse ranch." And she said, moving nothing but her eyes, "Oh yeah, beautiful."

At this point I decided I would like to get to know a little bit more about the pilot who was flying the balloon. So I asked him, "What's your name? What do you do for a living?" Because I wanted to try to get myself all psyched up that everything was going to be fine, that we were going to land safely. But the truth was we had entrusted our lives to the competence and character of the guy who was flying the balloon.

So I asked him, "What do you do for a living?" and, "How did you get started flying balloons?" I was hoping he would say something like he was a brain surgeon, and he had started flying balloons because he used to be an astronaut, and he missed going into outer space. I knew we were in trouble when his answer began, "Well, it's like this, dude. . . . " He did not actually have a job. Mostly, he surfed. He said, "It's kind of interesting how I got started flying these hot air balloons." He told me that he had too much to drink one day and he crashed his pickup truck. "You know how that goes," he said to me. (Sure!)

His brother was in the truck and was badly injured—couldn't get around too well anymore. So he started flying hot air balloons to give his brother something to watch on Saturday mornings. And, by the way, he said, "I've never flown this particular balloon before, so, if it descends in kind of a strange way, if it gets a little bumpy, don't worry about it. I've just never flown it before, and I don't know quite how it will handle on the way down."

My wife looked over at me: "You mean to tell me we're 1,000 feet up in the air with an unemployed surfer who started flying hot air balloons because he got drunk, crashed a pickup truck, crippled his brother, and he's never been in this balloon before, and he doesn't know how to bring it down?"

For this is the God who hides himself in burning bushes and in still, small voices, in the manger and on the cross.

At this point the wife of the other couple spoke for the first and only time during the whole trip. She looked over at me and said, "You're a pastor, do something religious!" (So I took an offering.)

The great question is, Can you trust the pilot? Is there somebody flying this thing? What's his character? What's his competence? Try to psyche yourself up if you want to. We live in a society that, in the words of one sociologist, has come to have faith in faith. "Just believe."

Where does trust come from? It's a by-product of knowing. Authentic trust comes only when I get to know the pilot. If the pilot's character is trustworthy, then the more I know, the more I'll trust him. Faith is a by-product of knowing. The only way to grow in faith is to get to know God, because God is faithful.

So Moses is saying, at least in part: "Before I go to Pharaoh, before I put my life in somebody else's hands, I've got to know if you can be trusted. What do I tell the people about your character? About your intentions? What's your name?"

And God says, "I am what I am." God says, "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM sent me.'"

Whole forests of trees have been cut down to provide paper for the books people write to try to explain what these words mean. I think at least one aspect of them is found in the following verse: "God also said to Moses, 'This you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever."'"

God says, "You know me. I'm the God of Abraham and Sarah. I'm the God of Isaac and Rebecca. I'm the God who cares about his people. I'm the God who has seen the misery of my people when they thought I was not looking. I have heard their groaning, even when they thought I was not listening. I was in the reeds when you were hidden as an infant. I was in Egypt when you fled as a fugitive." For this is the God who hides himself in burning bushes and in still, small voices, in the manger and on the cross. "Get your hopes up," God says. "I am what I am."

For God to reveal his name is for God to make himself fully available and accessible to his

people. He is opening himself wide up, and there is a kind of amazing vulnerability in it. "You know my name," God says. "I am no distant, remote figure. I have opened my heart to you." He says again to Moses, "Go, assemble the elders and tell them my name, and go to Pharaoh."

But Moses still will not go. One of the most remarkable features of this particular narrative is that the writer works very hard to portray Moses' great reluctance to trust God. Moses is a real person—and a pretty frustrating one. Five times the writer says, "God spoke to Moses," and five times Moses raises objections about why it is just not a good idea to send him. And finally, when nothing else works, Moses abandons all pretense and just says, "Send somebody else, God. Form a committee of associate deans from the tribes and send them. I don't want to do it."

There's a good reason for this. Moses is being asked to engage in an act of profound civil disobedience. He is being asked to subvert the social order. And he's got to decide between the comfort of Midian and the God of the burning bush. You can't have both.

Stephen Carter has written a book called *The Culture of Disbelief,* in which he argues that a primary role of religion is to bring discomfort to society. Carter says that we live in a society that encourages us to make God a hobby, that discourages us to name the name of God, not only in a literal sense, he says, but also in that very threatening sense in which a person may proclaim and live out the character of God and may thus prove very dangerous to the social order.

He says that unless one views the purpose of religion as making the mainstream comfortable, there will be religious people who are guided more by their faith than by the standards and demands of others. Those will be the dangerous people. He says a religion is, at its heart, "a way of denying the authority of the rest of the world, a way of saying to your fellow human beings, and the state that they have erected— 'no, I will not accede to your will.'"

But we don't like the thought of giving up comfort. We are into comfort. Karl Barth wrote once

Unless one views the purpose of religion as making the mainstream comfortable, there will be religious people who are guided more by their faith than by the standards . . . of others.

that comfort is one of the dominant themes of Western society. You know what the number-one selling chair in America is called? Lazy-Boy chair. Not Worker-Boy. Not Social-Justice-Boy. Lazy-Boy. It's a heavily endowed chair in our society. Sloth is the only one of the seven deadly sins to have a chair named after it.

Jesus is quite insistent on this point. Those who want to be followers of his will have to deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow him. For there are still pharaohs, and there are still people who suffer.

On December 1, 1955, a seamstress named Rosa Parks was arrested for sitting in no-man's land on a bus. Buses in Montgomery, Alabama, at that time were divided into the white section and the black section. And there was a section in the middle where black people could sit, but not if there were too many whites. She refused to leave. And so she was arrested. There was a prolonged discussion between her and leaders of the African-American community in Montgomery. The result of much discussion and much prayer was that they would say no to the whites: "No. We will not accede to your will."

So a woman from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church got together with a group of her friends and put together a letter. And they mailed out thousands of them and they said, "We will boycott." They said, "If you work, take a cab. Or share a ride, or walk. But no more buses." On Monday morning people got up early and all the buses rolled out, but they were empty.

People met that night after they got home from work at the Holt Street Baptist Church—somewhere between 10 and 15,000 African-American people. And the chairman of the Montgomery Improvement Association, a 26-year-old preacher by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "There comes a time when people are tired of being trampled by the iron feet of oppression. We are determined to live in Montgomery and work and fight until justice rolls down like water, righteousness like mighty streams!" he said. "We are not wrong," he said. "If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth," he said.

Taylor Branch, in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning account of this era of American history, had a great line about the preaching of Martin Luther King. He said, "Martin Luther King didn't shout, but he preached like somebody who wanted to shout."

The logistics of this boycott were staggering. There were in Montgomery 18 African-American-owned taxi companies. They tried to offer rides to people to and from work, 10 cents a ride. The police commissioner of Montgomery said that any driver who did not charge at least 45 cents for a ride would be arrested.

Between 30,000 and 40,000 rides a day were needed, and they had a carpool restricted to 300 cars. So people walked, sometimes two hours to work and two hours back. And at night they would meet together in churches and pray.

City commissioners one weekend planted a fake story in the wire services that the boycott was over and the settlement had been reached. The MIA got wind of it and had to put the word out through all of the churches in Montgomery that the boycott *wasn't* over. The next morning the buses were still empty.

Finally, Martin Luther King, after having been arrested, was alone in his kitchen, exhausted and afraid. Face in his hands, he said, "I've come to a place where I can't do it alone." And he prayed. "I am what I am," he said to God. And then he said that he heard an inner voice say that he must do what was right. He was convinced it was the same voice that said a long time ago, "I have seen the suffering of my people, and I am concerned, so I have come down."

The next Monday night he spoke at a rally. When he had finished, a woman named Mother Pollard came to the front. They used to do that sometimes at meetings. Elderly people who had won the respect of everybody would come up and comment on what had been said. We don't do that at my church. But they used to do it sometimes.

Mother Pollard came to the front of the church, and she said

God is going to take care of you. . . . God pointed to a cross and said, "You know my name. I am what I am."

to Martin Luther King, "What's the matter, son? Something's wrong. You didn't talk strong tonight."

He said, "No, Mother Pollard, I'm fine. Nothing's wrong."

She said, "Now you don't fool me. I know something's wrong. Is it that we're doing things that don't please you, or that the white folks are bothering you?" And then she got right into his face and she said as loud as she could, "I've told you we're with you all the way. But even if we're not with you, God is going to take care of you."

Then she inched her way back to her seat. The crowd exploded. And King stood there with tears in his eyes.

On Tuesday, November 13, 1956, the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregation on buses was unconstitutional. The people in that church read 1 Corinthians 13: "The greatest of these is love." And when it was finished, they cheered!

As it was said to Martin Luther King, as it was said to Moses, so it is said to you: God is going to take care of you. It was said supremely on another mountain through one greater than Moses, when God pointed to a cross and said, "You know my name. I am what I am." And so we give thanks.

An interesting thing about this passage: You never find out what happened to the bush. You find out what happened to Moses and the children of Israel. You find out what happened to Pharaoh and his soldiers. But you never find out what happened to the bush.

Sometimes I like to think that, somewhere, it's still burning. ■

JOHN C. ORTBERG, Ph.D., is a member of the Board of Trustees of Fuller Theological Seminary. He is pastor of the Horizons Community Church of Diamond Bar, in Diamond Bar, California.

HEBREWS 12:18-24

So Close, Yet So Far

BY JEREMY BEGBIE

It was getting windy as we set out along the ridge, 3,000 feet above a deserted moor. I was with my brother-in-law, and our goal was one of the most remote mountains in the northwest of Scotland. The summit stood at the end of a mile-long, knife-edged cliff. My heart sank when I saw the steepness of the summit cone and watched the clouds gather and the sky darken. To cheer myself up, I started humming "Climb Every Mountain"; but then I remembered that when the nun sang that song, she was in a convent, not 3,000 feet up a lonely mountain! At the end of the ridge, I looked up to the final tower of rock, now disappearing in the swirling mist. Only 20 feet away. But just in front of my feet, a vast chasm opened out, plunging down to the moor below. Even if I could have jumped it, the rock opposite was almost vertical. My feet just wouldn't budge. Rigid terror held me back. There was the summit, hiding in the gloom, only feet away—yet so inaccessible! If you think at this point I'm going to tell you that I looked that summit in the eye and conquered my fear and leaped across the crevasse (and that's what Christian faith is all about), then you're going to be disappointed. I stumbled all the way down the mountain, muttering to myself, "So close, yet so far!"

Have you ever known anyone for years and years and yet never known him or her at all—your father or mother perhaps? So close, yet so far?

Or have you a partner who likes saying to you, "You're here, Honey, but most of the time you're miles away"?

Or maybe you've had a close friend suddenly plagued with depression. You knew that person better than anybody, but now, now—utterly unreachable. So close, yet so far.

Isn't that the paradox that grips the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 12? The law comes to Israel at Sinai. And in one sense everything is so close. As he reminds us, it's all so visible and immediate. The earth shakes, lightning streaks the sky, fire erupts from the mountain. But in another way, it's all so inaccessible. There we are at the foot of the mountain. It's so near, only inches away—but you're dead if you touch it. It's so charged with the holiness of God, one step and you've had it. Let your animal onto it—you'll kill the animal. So close, this mountain, yet so far.

Eternity has come close, but in a new way—not to overwhelm but to welcome us, not with thunder but with the music of heaven.

And the same goes for God. God is disturbingly close. When Moses speaks to God, God answers with thunder. His voice roars back, and it's deafening. It makes us cower and cringe: "Moses: you can talk to us okay, but don't let God say anything! We can't handle God directly." God is near, surely, very near. But it's an overpowering nearness, a nearness that makes us hold back and keep our distance. Even when *Moses* gets near to God, even *he* shudders. So close, so spatially close this God may be, yet so inaccessible. So close, yet so far.

Of course, I know there's more to Sinai than that, and there's more to the Old Testament than that. Of course I know that, and the writer to the Hebrews knows that. But here he wants us to see the paradox of it all. Eternity is so close, it licks at you; it's so close—terrifyingly close—but at the same time, it's strangely, mysteriously inaccessible.

So it is with much of our worship, and that's part of what the writer to the Hebrews is thinking about here and what I want to focus on this morning: what happens when Christians gather together. We all know what it is to gather for worship and sense the immediate presence of God. Yet we also know what it is to hold back, to be afraid to let go, to be hesitant about stepping into the divine space.

So the fantastic contrast begins in verse 22: You have *not* come to Mount Sinai, you have come to Mount Zion. Don't you know that the unseen presence at Sinai has pierced the clouds? That the unreachable has become reachable? That eternity has come close, but in a new way—not to overwhelm but to welcome us, not with thunder but with the music of heaven? Don't you know that eternity is still so close, yes, but now so *accessible*?

Access. Isn't that the point of the contrast between Sinai and Zion? Access is yours, he's saying. Yes, of course, there's still mystery and awe and wonder. Nevertheless, the life of heaven has been opened up for you. Access is yours. And not least in your worship. Don't turn away. Don't go back to the old days and the old ways. This is your privilege. Access is yours, right through to the shining heart of eternity. *So close and so accessible.*

So access is ours. But access to *what,* exactly?

First of all, *to the crowds of heaven.* Listen to the phrases from verse 22: "You have come to Mount Zion . . . the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . innumerable angels in festal gathering . . . the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven . . . and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect." The crowds of heaven.

A year ago I took my seven-year-old son to a concert in Cambridge. In the second half, every note of the music was composed by the audience. A full-sized symphony orchestra waited in silence on the platform while the conductor wandered around the audience with a microphone, like a sort of musical Oprah Winfrey, collecting ideas and tossing them at the players. It reminded me of the worst of Protestant worship. Do-it-yourself worship. We compose a symphony for God and hope to goodness he likes our style. That's worship?

Not according to the writer of Hebrews—and worship is part of what he's talking about here. No, the players and singers are already on the go. The symphony already fills the courts of heaven. Before we even thought about this service this morning, before we moved a muscle to get here, the multitudes of saints were pealing with praise. The wonderful music we make this morning is only a tiny part of the even more wonderful music of heaven. And after it's over, when the church is empty and we're finishing that late paper—or struggling with the hermeneutics of suspicion and our suspicion of hermeneutics—the crowds of heaven will be playing and singing to the glory of the Lord of Lords. A vast movement of praise, a great symphonic exaltation soaring to the one and only God, sung by that throng that no one can number in luxuriant counterpoint, hundreds, thousands, millions upon millions, in one, unending, festive *hallelujah!*

And you, says the writer to the Hebrews, you can tune in and join in. You can join them,

Access is yours and don't forget it. . . . You worship with the company of heaven! . . . You can sing with the heavenly hosts right now!

he's saying. Access is yours and don't forget it. Don't let some half-remembered Protestant prejudice about saints get in the way. You worship with the company of heaven! And don't think it's all in the remote future. You *have come* to Mount Zion, he says (perfect tense), you have come *now*. You can sing with the heavenly hosts right now!

And why is that so vital to remember? Because, above all, we see that our struggle of faith is not in vain. Think of a ten-year-old violinist who one day gets invited to play along with a professional orchestra. She squeaks along with them in the back row and hears this incredible sound around her, and she suddenly realizes it's going to be worth the hours of practice and sweat and frustration. So with us. We worship today with those who have been where we are, and who now make the music of heaven.

Think of them all. I think of tiny Russian congregations who for years clutched Bibles with cold hands behind closed doors, now reveling in the warmth of the Kingdom of heaven. I think of a schizophrenic I knew, crying out daily to this God the chaplain told him about, and now he knows he wasn't crying into emptiness. I think of my godfather's son, painfully brain-damaged, lovingly tended for five years until the day he died, with a Christian faith that would put most of us to shame. (My godfather said the day after he died that he could hear him singing and laughing in heaven, a liberated, exultant laugh ringing into eternity!) Think of Luther, Latimer, Jesuit missionaries, West African slaves—thousands of them—clinging to God in the face of fire and bullet and whip, convinced they were being led to a heavenly city, now knowing they weren't deluded.

They've all gone before us, says the writer here—pilgrims who heard the music of heaven and followed it through to the source. So when we gather, we gather with them. And everything will look and feel different. We begin to see that it is worth persevering, that not one prayer is ever wasted, not one invitation to an evangelistic address goes for nothing, not one attempt to fight for those who have no voice is ever in vain. There is a goal; there is a place where all the cacophony of the world is taken up and harmonized. And when we know that, we begin to sense the pleasure of the saints. We start to taste their joy.

Don't miss out on this, the writer is saying. They're alive, the saints, more alive than any of us—only just out of the range of our senses, just beyond our

perception. The symphony of the saints surrounds us, an ever-present encouragement. Hear the music of heaven beckoning us! The orchestra is playing, the choir is lost in song—*so close, and so accessible.*

We not only have access to the crowds of heaven but also *to God himself, the supreme judge* (verse 23). Solemn, ominous words. Words with a whiff of the drafty gospel hall, organs with maximum tremolo, hour-long sermons from blazered preachers who preach that "one day we'll meet our Maker, and who knows what will happen on that day? Who knows what God will really be like on that day?"

But it's a bit different here. *You have come* to God himself, says the writer. You have already met the supreme Judge. Have you never heard of Jesus Christ? The supreme Judge has shown his face. You won't have to wait to find out what God is *really* like, whether he really *does* love you, whether he really *is* offering abundant life and grace and joy and peace. Access to the supreme Judge is ours, *now*. Of course, we haven't arrived in heaven yet. And of course, there's a right kind of hesitancy and reserve. Nevertheless, the Judge has opened his very heart to us. He offers a welcome now, unlimited hospitality, and we know in his presence there is nothing to fear except falling away.

And what could be more liberating? In any church, as all of us know too well, in worship it doesn't take long for us to get overcautious, excessively circumspect, reluctant to step out—just like the people he's writing to here.

I was preaching at a service in a church in the south of England not so long ago, and I don't think I have ever seen a service so perfectly managed. It would have made a royal wedding look chaotic. I felt almost stifled by the impeccable taste of it all. Even breathing made me feel I might desecrate the decorum. It was like being in the living room of an elderly relative, with hundreds of pieces of priceless china precariously arranged on thin-legged tables.

I have a hunch that authentic Christian worship has a slightly different feel to it. I don't mean it's slovenly or unprepared; I mean it has a sense of space, like an open beach, an unhurried place where you can be with others and breathe deeply and freely and sing a new song without being nervous. The word that comes to mind is boldness, *parrhesia*, a key word in Hebrews. Boldness. It's not about arrogance, or presumption, or brashness. It's about knowing that you can be before God without a paralyzing terror—that in the heart of God there beats the music of love, the love that ever flows between Father and Son and Spirit. It's about knowing God wants you to sing your song in tune with him. It's about knowing that access is yours, knowing that God's life is close—so close and so accessible.

A vast continent of wonder and joy awaits us where the broken themes of our lives can be woven into a new harmony.

But the author can't stop there. Because we're bound to ask, How do we know access is ours? How do we know we can get through to the music of heaven, and to the living God? So, of course, the answer comes (in verse 24): You have come *to Jesus,* the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. The blood of Abel—the blood of hatred and jealousy and bitterness that screams out to God, the blood that makes God turn his face. The blood on the dress of the murdered schoolgirl in Bosnia, the blood in the cell of the tortured hostage in Beirut, the blood that makes God recoil. The blood that threatens to close the doors to heaven, that makes God inaccessible.

But there's another kind of blood, we're told, that flowed from the sides of a person crucified outside Jerusalem—blood that absorbs the hatred that wrecks our lives, that absorbs the world's noise and dissonance that deafen us to God, that swings the gates of heaven open, wide open to the living God, so we can hear God and God can hear us, and we can start to make music again.

Not only that. It's not just that the gates are open. There is one who now comes to our side and offers to take us through. That's very different from Sinai. Notice at Sinai, everything comes *at* you. God's voice pounds at us from beyond. It booms toward us from the mountain. And there's plenty of worship that does no more than that, that only pounds at you endlessly from afar. But things are different now, according to the writer of Hebrews. Yes, God's Word comes from beyond. But there's also a movement in the other direction, a voice *from our side* to God—a voice fully at home in the courts of heaven, but a human voice, touched with our frailty—the voice of Jesus Christ carrying our prayers to the throne of grace, giving us access.

Nothing is too human to be brought to worship: our confusion about our own calling, the wreckage of a shattered relationship, our doubts about whether God can be trusted when he often seems so chronically absent, our fear of losing our old self and our old skills, our terror of what people will find out about us, and the crushing sense of inadequacy that engulfs us all from time to time—when we catalog all the things that disqualify us from the City of God—the barely flickering prayer life, the thoughts we dare not speak to others, the shameful way we treat each other.

"Don't let these things get in the way," whispers the voice of the Mediator. "Let me begin to deal with them. I'm not ashamed to call you my sister or brother. Access is yours."

So Jesus goes about among us in our worship this morning, his eyes dark with longing that we won't shrink back and miss what he offers, his wounds the guarantee that the music of heaven can be ours. Gently he comes alongside us and invites us to join the crowds in heaven, to find again the boldness that we may have lost but that he longs for us to have.

A vast continent of wonder and joy awaits us where the broken themes of our lives can be woven into a new harmony. Even now, access is ours. It's closer than we think, much closer. So close, *so close.* ■

JEREMY BEGBIE, Ph.D., visiting professor of church music at Fuller Theological Seminary, is the director of studies and a tutor in doctrine in Ridley Hall at Cambridge University, Cambridge, England. He is also the founder and conductor of the New Cambridge Orchestra.

JONAH 4:1-10

Jonah 4: The Big 'A'

BY CLAUDIA M. ROWE

Someone a while back designed a winner of a commercial for Disney. You've seen it, even if you're like me and hardly ever watch professional sports. I know you've seen it. The team is going crazy, and this sportscaster thrusts his mike in the face of the star and yells: "So-and-so, you've just won the Super Bowl! What's next?"

Jonah's persistent and personal God is a passionate God. He cares.

"I'm going to Disneyland!" the athlete shouts back over the noise of the crowds. I'm pretty cynical, so about now I'm usually saying to myself something like, I wonder how much they paid him to say that? Or, Does somebody actually check and see if he really shows up there?

So, all in all, I wasn't totally unprepared when, about five minutes after Nancy Kerrigan won her Olympic silver medal for figure skating that Friday night, I saw her skating across an unmarked rink, holding Mickey Mouse's hand. An invisible voice came out of the air, asked her the expected question, and, with a big smile, she said: "I'm going to Disney World!"

You bet you are! my inside voice said. Because you just signed a major big-bucks deal with them! (See, I'm not completely comfortable with the way we hand over our fun to Disney to process and package, the way we hand over our cheese to Kraft.)

But, cynic or not, I somehow think Jonah would have come off better if he'd gone to Disneyland following the repentance of Nineveh. What he actually does and says is not a great demonstration of what we all aim and long to be, but it certainly says some intriguing things about what we actually find ourselves doing and being.

Before the events which were just read to us, the people of Nineveh have turned from the harm they were doing to one another and themselves, and so Yahweh has turned from the harm and destruction he intended and had declared to them. Just as Yahweh drops his anger, Jonah picks it up in a big way, and he's burning up with it. So, Nineveh has repented. Yahweh has repented. The big question is, *Will Jonah repent?*

As my friend Jeff said when preaching on this passage once: "This really *is* the book of Jonah, you know. It's not the book of Nineveh." It's about God's dealing with this one person.

That's not to say that God didn't have a plan for Nineveh and wasn't downright intent on seeing it fulfilled, because he certainly was. And I've been in urban ministry long enough to have had opportunities to preach on God's heart for the city from this text. But not today. Because, in today's passage, the author of the book turns our focus onto Jonah, while Jonah has turned his focus onto the city (hoping against hope that there will be fire and dust sometime in the next six weeks!).

Jonah is *really* angry. He's got the big "A." He spits accusations at his God. Listen to the accusations: "You're a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, ready to repent from punishing." (I thought this was the good news! Obviously not to Jonah!) He picks those words out of the wonderful words of his worshiping community and sends them like poisoned darts into the face of Almighty God. And then he says, "Let me die! Let me die! I want to be rid of you! You see, I have found out what you're like. I tried to run and that didn't work. So you'd cancel the contract, would you? There isn't room in life for both you and me!"

Jonah is in no condition for a conversation. Yahweh asks him a question and he walks out. He is finished with God! (At least he *thinks* he is!) But Yahweh is not finished with Jonah.

"O Love that will not let me go." Jonah's God is *persistent*. More bad news is ahead for Jonah.

But you see, there's nothing gray or grim about the persistence of Yahweh. He's not that mosquito who won't quit buzzing in your ear, or the bulldog who won't let go of his opponent's throat. No, there's a marvelous playfulness about this God as he pursues his purposes flawlessly. Consider the Great Guppy he appointed to gulp Jonah down, and then throw him up (after his all-expense-paid return trip back to where he belonged via the Smelly Belly Express). Jonah actually liked the trip. Well, it beat drowning!

And we saw some things about Jonah in those first two chapters—during the storm, and inside the fish. We saw some personal integrity there, some courage, and an unwillingness to let the sailors go down for what was his responsibility. Also, there was a wonderful, spontaneous response of gratitude when he experienced God's salvation. Very lovable.

A God as passionate *and* personal *and* persistent *as this one is not always very easy for* us *to live with.*

I'm particularly touched after my years on the Young Life staff—trying to put all the big truths we love into words that aren't religious—at his marvelous ability to be comprehensible to pagans when he describes his God. His theology—it sings and rings true. And his way with a psalm of salvation, I tell you, is as good as King David's. A pretty mixed bag, Jonah is. Gifted, but flawed. Sincere, but narrow. In fact, all in all, it turns out he's a lot like us.

Back in chapters 1 and 2, God was after Jonah's obedience. He's not after that anymore. Not this round. Now God is after Jonah's heart. And when this playfully persistent God goes after Jonah—well, so far it's *Yahweh, 1, and Jonah, zip.* Good luck, Jonah! I mean it! I hope you lose this one *big time.*

This God who won't let Jonah go is a God not only persistent but *personal.* Now, ABC may have popularized the phrase "up close and personal," but Yahweh invented the reality of the approach. And it goes both ways. Jonah relates to Yahweh as an intimate, too. Luther commented that Jonah is "a queer old saint who is angry because of God's mercy for sinners, begrudging them all benefits and wishing them all evil . . . and yet he is God's dear child. He chats so uninhibitedly with God as though he were not in the least afraid of him—as indeed he is not. He confides in him as in a father." (Evidently, Luther's idea of "chatting" and mine are a bit different.) But the personalness that rings through that comment I see in the conversations of Jonah and Yahweh. Yahweh can handle Jonah's anger, and Jonah's very confident of that.

This personal God who is pursuing Jonah in my text is not making a strategic play. See, Yahweh has already gotten Jonah's obedience. Nineveh has been reached. So, let's not see God reaching out to Jonah because he is the single link to an "unreached people" group (although he was that—both with the sailors and with the Ninevites). But as far as we know, Jonah's career is now winding down. One reason it's important to see that God is not simply retooling and retraining him for future prophetic activity is that this point of view can keep us from personalizing God's dealings in our own lives. One of the things we do to avoid the devastating impact of grace on our own hearts is to imagine that God only sees us as a means of reaching others. God is dealing with Jonah because he wants Jonah—not to *use* Jonah, but to *have* him!

Right about here, it gets hard to distinguish the persistence of God from his personal approach. He can be a pretty invasive sort of God. Jonah wanted him out of his face. So he locked all his doors and fastened all his windows. Sorry, Jonah. We've tried that, haven't we? And we've found out he knows where we hide the spare key. He knows us. And he comes right to us. He's got the best reconnaissance in the universe.

I recently spent Presidents' Weekend with a bunch of high school kids at a beach house in Ventura. I hadn't done that for eight years. Haven't been so scared in a long time! I gave each small group one scene out of Jonah to dramatize for the rest of us. So on Saturday night, we saw "Jonah Live!" At lots of points it became so real (and so funny) that we were all doubled over hooting at each other.

My favorite moment came in the scene we are looking at today. Let me paint it for you because there are some nuances here: two high school juniors—their features making it obvious they are Chinese, their haircuts making it obvious they are American teenagers—part of a worldwide subculture of adolescents. You are looking at God with a two-layer bowl cut. Jonah has a crewcut with one long section hanging down over half his face. In their interaction, they are using gestures and cadences that are rooted in the African-American experience, but have been claimed by teenagers all over America as their own.

So this is how Yahweh addresses Jonah: "Why you put the big 'A' on me, man?" And they nailed it. They absolutely nailed it! I said, "Yes!" This personal God, who comes to each of us as individuals, would have come to them just like that—

Can we really handle this merciful and meddlesome God, with all his compassion and passion?

their language, their haircuts, their own familiar way of communicating. And, if God was dealing with you or me, Jonah 4 would have developed differently. His approach was tailor-made for Jonah.

See, Yahweh knows how to get to Jonah. Not through his ears, but through his pores. He plans to send a message through his nerve endings, because Jonah is most definitely a kinesthetic style of learner. The storm and the fish worked. So God starts out with some new appointments. First, a bush: Jonah loves the shade. He hasn't been so happy since he was inside the fish. Then, my personal favorite: God appoints a worm. Some eater, this worm! By morning, a dead and withered bush is hanging over Jonah's head. A hot Jonah! And, to add insult to injury, Yahweh whistles for a wind. It's a nasty desert wind. I experience a certain amount of mind-muddling with a good Santa Ana wind. Multiply that by about ten, and add a desert sun. One parboiled prophet. "I want to die!" Same line. But this time he is not standing and spewing it. He's slumped over and suffering sunstroke. Now Jonah barely gets the words out, but he's serious about it. So we've got to make it *Yahweh, 2, and Jonah, 0.* See, God has got Jonah talking again.

Jonah's persistent and personal God is a *passionate* God. He cares. And he's brought Jonah to the point of caring for something. Something free. Something he valued. Something that was destroyed. The lecture that goes with the lab work Jonah has already accomplished has now begun. This is a one-on-one lecture dealing with issues like: Who belongs to whom? Who has the right to be angry with whom? About what? and Who gets to care about what? and Why?

God pulls out all the stops: "Why are *you* so upset, Jonah? *You* did nothing to make that bush grow. This was *my* bush—I made it grow. These are my people and my cattle—each more valuable than the bush you're grieving for. You care for the bush—my bush? Okay. But don't stop there. Shouldn't I have tears flow from my eyes over 120,000 souls who don't know their right from their left hands?" (Echoes. Do you hear the echoes? A Messiah weeps over a city that did not repent. A Savior pleads for forgiveness for those who do not know the import of what they do.) "I have a right to care, Jonah," declares Yahweh. "Do you care about the bush? Go right ahead, just don't stop there. And you are mine, too, Jonah. I am the God of Israel, but I am not Israel's God only. I do not belong to you except as you belong to me."

Actually, Jonah reminds me a lot of house cats I've known. Think about it. Most cats believe they own their owners. My friend Julie's cat, Chubby, is convinced

that Julie is his person. Chubby, as far as I can see, has never entertained the possibility that he, in fact, is her cat. She exists entirely for *his* provision, *his* comfort, *his* entertainment, and, at his whim and on his timetable, *his* affection. And so Jonah.

But Jonah has had another look at reality. The worldview he had so carefully crafted and made impervious, even to his own much larger theology, has been penetrated by this 24-hour object lesson. What will Jonah do next? Will he stay stuck? Will he blow it off and go to Disneyland—or will he change? Will the bush, the worm, and the wind work like the storm and fish did? Our author leaves the question open. In doing so, he flings it into our laps. Will Jonah repent? We don't know. I hope so. And my money is on Yahweh. Because he goes on dealing—then and now. A God as *passionate* and *personal* and *persistent* as this one is not always very easy for *us* to live with, either. When he's gotten obedience from us and is back for round two, and he's after our hearts, it's not as easy to respond as it was when we were backseat drivers on Jonah's trip.

Can *we* really handle this merciful and meddlesome God, with all his compassion and passion? As my mentor George MacDonald wrote, this God "is easy to please, but hard to satisfy." Like the lover who wants to go beyond friendship to intimacy—the one who is not satisfied until one heartbeat is shared by two. And then when he comes and says, "Let's go beyond being master and servant, to real friendship and partnership," we take a closer look; and something in us may just say—nothing as dramatic or final as "Let me die!"—but more like, "Let me just go on punching the clock. I'll be a faithful hourly worker. I'll pay up my union dues. But I'm not sure profit-sharing is worth the headaches and the demands of ownership."

"O Love that will not let me go," I cannot "rest my weary soul in thee," when it's *thee* I'm resisting.

> *"O Love that will not let me go," I cannot "rest my weary soul in thee," when it's* thee *I'm resisting.*

Jonah had to be weary, going one-on-one with God. Not exactly an even contest. But as demanding as it can be to deal with such a God, the alternative is really lousy. Who wants to be left alone with our unchanged selves—for even one slice of forever? Brothers and sisters, here is the gospel in Jonah. The good news in Jonah is Jonah's God. He bothers. He bothers with Jonah. And Jonah is a bother! He bothers with me. Why am I worth bothering with? You'll have to ask the Lord God. He's the one who gets to decide who's worth bothering with, dealing with, reasoning with, going one-on-one with, arranging tutorials for, and object lessons. He appoints the plants and worms and winds. He decided Jonah was worth it. He has decided (in this ninth week of the quarter) that you are worth it. And I am.

This he demonstrated on a hill in Assyria, to a mixed-bag believer called Jonah. And he demonstrated it on a hill in Judea, to his disciples and detractors alike. And all the inhabitants of heaven held their collective breaths in agonized wonder at the sight of this *persistent* and *personal* and *passionate* God.

Thirty days and counting down with Jonah to the nonnuking of Nineveh. Jonah watched Nineveh, waiting to see its salvation or destruction.

Thirty-one days in our countdown to the execution of the Son of God. We wait to see again our salvation in *his* destruction. *Thanks be to God!* ■

CLAUDIA ROWE, M.Div., is a postgraduate student of Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Theology, and a ministerial candidate under care of the San Gabriel Presbytery in California.

RUTH 1:6-18; EPHESIANS 4:25–5:1

When My Life Falls Apart, Will You Be There?

BY FREDERIC W. BUSH

The older I get—and I am now approaching 65 (and I can't believe it!)—the more I realize that inside every adult man and woman there is really still just a little boy or a little girl. And so this morning we're going to have children's church, for I'm going to tell you a story—in particular, the story of Ruth and Naomi in the first chapter of the book of Ruth. The theme of my story could well be the words of Paul to the Ephesians, in chapter 5, verses 1 and 2: "Be imitators of God, therefore, . . . and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Here Paul tells us that the sacrificial way Jesus expressed his love for us is not only our way of salvation, but also our measure of what it means to live for the sake of others.

Now the beautiful and powerful thing about a story is that it will put living sinew and muscle and flesh upon the bare bones of theological statement or ethical admonition. So come with me as we think about the story of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth, chapter 1—for of all the stories I know in the Bible, this lovely little book is, among other things, the most moving and powerful example of what it means to live for the sake of others.

The circumstances that create the problem in our story are set forth in the first two verses of the book: "During the time when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and so a certain man from Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the territory of Moab, together with his wife and his two sons. The man's name was Elimelech, the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. And they came to the territory of Moab and there they remained."

> *Have things ever crashed in upon you so that you . . . can only in bitterness and anger bring charges against God for the way he runs his world?*

So here we learn that famine has driven an ordinary Judean family to Moab. But that is not the stuff that a good story is made of—at least not this good story. This story is delineated by the parallel statements of verses 3 to 5, where form and content unite to highlight the theme of death and deprivation: "Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died and she and her two sons were left alone" (verse 3). This tragic picture is given momentary respite through the marriage of the sons: "They took Moabite wives, the name of one being Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years" (verse 4). But the possibility of the continuation of the family, first postponed by ten years without progeny, is then dramatically ended: "Both Mahlon and Chilion also died and," our narrator tells us, "the woman was left alone without her two boys and without her husband" (verse 5). Here our author leaves the particularity and individuality of his story. He does not say, "Naomi was left alone," but makes a general statement for his audience to ponder. *"The woman,"* he says, "was left alone without her two boys and without her husband." And in this way he sets forth powerfully and poignantly the major problem our story will address: What will happen to a woman in a patriarchal society in which (as all his original hearers knew so well) all power and privilege was vested in the male members of the family, when suddenly all of them are gone? Ancient Israel was a man's world; and here a man's world is to tell a woman's story.

To grasp fully the desperateness of Naomi's plight, we must remember that in that ancient, patriarchal society, the only vocation open to a woman was marriage and motherhood. And a woman in general had virtually no legal rights and standing in her own person. As a widow, then—and especially a childless widow—her plight was most unenviable. In Israelite society a widow had no rights of inheritance in her husband's estate. As

a widow she had no male head of the house to provide her security and sustenance or even legal standing. The only protection she had was the public compassion which the law codes of Israel prescribed with their frequent admonitions to care for the widow and the orphan. And that was honored more in the breach than in the observance, for one of the constant themes of the prophets was to measure Israel's merciless guilt by their mistreatment and oppression of widows. As the book of Job puts it: "Though you were a powerful man owning land, an honored man living on it, yet you sent widows away empty-handed and broke the strength of orphans" (Job 22:9).

Naomi's life has fallen apart and she can see no hope whatever. To discern this we only need to jump ahead a little bit in our story. When Naomi heard the famine was over and returned to Bethlehem, our story uses the arrival scene in verses 19 to 22 at the end of this chapter to portray only one thing: how crushed and broken is Naomi's spirit. He tells us, in verse 19, that when she and Ruth arrived, the whole town hummed with excitement. And the women welcomed her with a glad cry of delighted recognition: "Is this really Naomi?" they said. "Where have you been? What's happened? Where are the boys?" Naomi's reply speaks eloquently of the bitter pain that pervades her soul. In Hebrew thought, one's name can be expressive of one's character, being, and personality. And in Hebrew *Naomi* means "sweet, pleasant." So Naomi, Pleasant One, cannot abide to hear her name resounding in happy surprise on the lips of all those ladies standing around. She silences the glad crowd with her pain-filled cry:

> "Naomi! Don't call me Naomi, Sweet! Call me Mara, Bitter! For bitter indeed has the Almighty made my life! Full was I when I went away; but empty has the Lord brought me back. Why do you call me Naomi, Sweet, when the Lord has spoken against me, and the Almighty has pronounced disaster upon me?"

With a faith that takes God so seriously that she cannot rail against fate or chance or circumstances, she pours out her bitter charge against God. Life for

We yearn for God's caring love and presence to be extended to us when life falls apart.

Naomi has fallen apart in the worst way that life could fall apart for a woman in a male-dominated society: husbandless and childless, and in a foreign land to boot!

I wonder, has your life ever fallen apart? Have things ever crashed in upon you so that you, like Naomi, can only in bitterness and anger bring charges against God for the way he runs his world? Suppose that to you, as to Job of old, suddenly, out of the blue, leap dreadful tidings of disaster. Could you face it as he did? "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

Suppose that to you, as to Ezekiel, that valiant soul, there comes a day when, with no second's warning, you are given the bleak message: "Son of man, behold, I take away the delight of your eyes at a stroke, but neither shall you weep nor shall your tears run down. . . . So I preached to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died" (Ezekiel 24:16,18).

Suppose, young married couples, it happens to you, as it did to me almost 30 years ago, that your wife experiences increasingly severe abdominal upsets. Nothing bringing relief one night, you rush her to Emergency. After several days of tests, they perform exploratory surgery. And after a biopsy, the surgeon brings back the dread report: "It's a tumor in the colon and it's cancerous."

I say, "suppose," but, of course, there's no supposing in the matter. Of a certainty, to each of us in turn such things must come. In this chapel service there must be many of you for whom life has fallen apart at one time or another. And I don't doubt for a moment that there are some of us whose lives *today* have fallen apart in some sense or other.

If you've been through a devastating divorce and your family has been torn up, you know what life falling apart means.

If you or your spouse suddenly lost a job and you don't know where another one is coming from, and you can't quite put all that together, and you lie awake nights worrying about how you're going to meet the bills, then you know what life falling apart means.

If you've coped with the stresses of life by burying anger and hurt for so long that anxiety and depression make much of your life an emotional agony, then you know what life falling apart means.

If illness has laid you up long enough that you have no hope of successfully completing the quarter's work, and the fear of academic failure is an ever-present reality, then you know what life falling apart means.

If you're suddenly single or have been single all your years, and you yearn to be merged with someone in marriage, and the weekends are long and lonely, then you know what life falling apart means.

Thirty-five years ago next month, while I was studying for final exams in one of the classrooms on the third floor of Payton Hall, I learned that my father had died suddenly and unexpectedly in Canada. If you've known recently the sudden loss of a loved one far away, then you know what life falling apart means.

Life falls apart for all of us at different levels at times; and if it hasn't happened to you, you can be sure that it will.

So life fell apart for Naomi there in Moab, and her days and her nights were consumed with bitterness and despair.

But Naomi belongs to the people of God. We have every reason to expect that God's covenant love and tender, caring mercy will be extended to her—just as we yearn for God's caring love and presence to be extended to us when life falls apart. How is God's love and care extended to Naomi in the loneliness and emptiness of her widowhood? Let us journey with her as she returns from Moab and see.

In verse 6 our author tells us, "Then she set out with her daughters-in-law and returned from Moab, for she heard there that the Lord had seen to the needs of his people by giving them food." Now, although our author has not given the slightest hint as to how Naomi's desperate state of affairs will be resolved, in the way he states the reason for her return he raises our hopes and expectations, for he interprets the physical facts in the light of his covenant faith. He could have said something like, "She heard that the rains have come early and stayed late for two full seasons, and the harvest has been abundant." But rather he says, "She heard that the Lord had seen to the needs of his people by giving them food." We who hear the story and share such a faith can only wait to see how and in what way the Lord will likewise remember Naomi.

The famine in Judah is over. And the famine in the life of Naomi? Well, our narrator

Ruth was the arms that God placed around Naomi. His love, his tender, caring mercy, had hands and feet and a body.

continues in verse 7, "So she set forth from the place where she had been staying, her two daughters-in-law with her, and they took the road to return to the land of Judah." Now our storyteller thus far has made Naomi the center of the problem with his statement, "The woman was left alone." But now, in verses 6 and 7, he very subtly but expressively raises the problem of the two daughters-in-law, who have thus far been left in the background. He does this in a way that is very difficult to bring out in translation, but it is very striking in the Hebrew. For even though the first clause of verse 6 begins, "She and her daughters-in-law set out," the next four verbs are feminine singular: "*She* returned from Moab, for *she* heard . . ." "So *she* set forth from the place where *she* had been staying." This is quite at variance with normal Hebrew grammar. The daughters-in-law are included, but only in the circumstantial clause, "her two daughters-in-law with her" (verse 7).

It is not until the end of verse 7 that we finally have a verb in the feminine plural: "And *they* traveled on the road to return to the land of Judah." The daughters-in-law are *not* said to return or hear or set forth from where *they* were staying. They are only *with* their mother-in-law. In this way our storyteller suggests to his hearers in a subtle and skillful way the ambiguity and uncertainty of the position and intentions of the two young women. What are they doing accompanying Naomi? They are Moabite young women, and there never was any love lost between Moabites and Israelites! Further, the only kind of meaningful life their patriarchal world afforded them was marriage and a home. That's tough enough to find as widows, but as Moabites in an Israelite world?

This is not lost on Naomi, for she now addresses this very problem, and she opens the dialogue by frontally attacking the issue. She commands each of them to go back to Moab: "Come, return each of you to her mother's house" (verse 8). Then she buttresses this command by imploring the Lord to bless their return: "May the Lord deal kindly and faithfully with you as you have done with the dead and with me" (verse 9). The ambiguity of the situation of the three of them, skillfully expressed in verses 6 and 7, coupled with this specific demand, reveals the mixed feelings and difficulty of Naomi's position. To have Orpah and Ruth return to Moab means that she must journey home utterly alone and desolate, having lost all. But to have them return to Judah with her means asking them to renounce all hope of the life she now implores

the Lord to give them. Faced with this dilemma, she has no real choice. To the calamity of losing home, husband, and sons, she must now add another, inflicted this time by herself. She must send her daughters-in-law away and return home alone. Her words are said with feeling and with pain, for she kisses them good-bye, and they all weep and sob loudly.

The parting, however, is not to be easy. Neither of the young women can simply acquiesce to such a solution: "No," they cry, "we will go *with* you back to your people!" (verse 10).

Naomi responds to this refusal with three separate statements, in each of which she addresses them poignantly as "my daughters." The form and tone of this response shows that she is not engaging in logical argument. Indeed, she does not really give reasons at all. Rather, we hear the anguished, almost angry, cry of a woman overwhelmed by the bitter knowledge that she must return home alone and cannot drag two young women into the hopelessness of her widowed and lonely state. But they seem set on accompanying her:

> "Go back, my daughters! Why will you come with me? Do I yet have sons in my womb to become husbands to you? Go back, my daughters! Go! For I am too old to have a husband. Even if I said that I had such a hope—indeed if I had a husband this night and actually bore sons—would you wait for them until they grew up? Would you go without a husband for them? No, my daughters! For my life is much too bitter for you to share, for the Lord has stretched out his hand against me."

Naomi's anguished appeal is met with continued weeping and with two opposite responses (verse 14). Orpah assents to Naomi's urging and kisses her mother-in-law farewell. Her

We have been granted the inestimable privilege of being the presence of God to one another.

decision meets the demands of common sense. As Naomi puts it in the next verse, she "returned to her people and her God." The story implies no negative judgment on Orpah's action. She broke no laws and she obeys Naomi, thereby reducing her present pain. But though her action may be acceptable and reasonable, it means she can play no further role in Naomi's world, and she passes from the story. Our author does not even offer us a single glance at her lonely journey home.

Ruth's response is equally as expressive as Orpah's farewell kiss. She now physically clings to her mother-in-law. Having succeeded with Orpah, Naomi responds to Ruth's actions by urging her to follow her sister-in-law's example: "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her God. Go back after your sister-in-law!" (verse 15).

To this last demand from Naomi, Ruth responds with words that she subsequently enfleshed with hands and feet and body—words which for many of us have expressed as have few others ever penned the love and devotion that one person can give to another in one of the darkest hours that people can face when life falls apart:

> "Oh urge me not to leave you, or turn back from following you! For wherever you travel, I will travel. And wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die; and there shall I be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me and more also. Nothing but death will separate me from you!" (verses 16,17).

Here Ruth's devotion encompasses not only all of life, expressed by the opposites to "travel" and to "stay," but extends to the end of this life itself. Even in the place of burial will they be united. It transcends even the bonds of racial origin and religious devotion. Naomi's people and Naomi's God will henceforth be hers. And, giving the ring of truth to her words, she then immediately takes the name of the Lord on her lips in a solemn oath that only death itself will finally separate them.

In her moving exposition of the book of Ruth, Phyllis Trible observes that in the entire epic of Israel, only Abraham himself matched such radical commitment. But then he had an explicit call from God and was a man in a man's world. But, says Trible:

> "Ruth stands alone; she possesses nothing. No God has called her; no deity has promised her blessing; no human being has come to her aid. She lives and chooses without a support group and she knows that the fruit of her decision may well be the emptiness of rejection, indeed of death. Consequently, not even Abraham's leap of faith surpasses this decision of Ruth's. And there is more. Not only has Ruth broken with family, country, and faith, but she has also reversed sexual allegiance. A young woman has committed herself to the life of an old woman rather than to the search for a husband. . . . One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel.[1]

How was God's covenant love, his caring, tender mercy, extended to Naomi when her life fell apart—in her bitter pain and emptiness? Ruth was the arms that God placed around Naomi. His love, his tender, caring mercy, had hands and feet and a body—and her name was Ruth.

And when, 25 years ago, while spending a quiet evening with a group of faculty friends, the phone call came to say that the coma into which my wife had lapsed was mercifully over, and suddenly I could not face again going back to that lonely bedroom and that empty bed, I had a friend whose name was Jim, who put his arms around me and took me home to spend the night—took away the emptiness of that bed. And in the days and weeks that followed, he and others were the presence of God to me that kept life together when life had fallen apart.

We have been granted the inestimable privilege of being the presence of God to one another. And our caring presence is the concrete and normative way that God mediates his covenant love and mercy to us when life falls apart. The same truth resounds through the rest of the story of

We must be imitators of God, then, by loving "as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."

Ruth. Through Ruth's continued faithfulness to Naomi in gleaning in the fields, she meets Boaz (in chapter 2). Through Naomi's faithfulness to Ruth, and her clever and risky scheme in sending Ruth to Boaz on the threshing floor, Naomi finds in Boaz a home and husband for Ruth (in chapter 3). And through Boaz' kindness and generosity—and, above all, his faithfulness to his family responsibilities—the land of Elimelech is restored to the family and a son is born (in chapter 4). And in the concluding scene in chapter 4, verses 14 to 17, the transformation of Naomi's life from emptiness to fullness is dramatically depicted when, in a touching scene in verse 16, she takes the son of Ruth and Boaz and presses him to her bosom. And the women of the town—the same female chorus who, in chapter 1, heard her broken and bitter complaint—say to Naomi: "Blessed is the Lord who has not left you today without a redeemer, an heir to care for you. He will renew your life and cherish you in your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you and is more to you than seven sons has given him birth."

And so we learn in this lovely story that we have been granted the inestimable privilege of being the presence of God to one another and that our caring presence is the concrete and normative way that God mediates his covenant love and supporting mercy and grace to us at those times when life falls apart.

We must be imitators of God, then, by loving "as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice." ■

ENDNOTE

1. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1973, p. 173.

FREDERIC W. BUSH, Ph.D., is the D. Wilson Moore Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Studies in the School of Theology of Fuller Theological Seminary. An Old Testament scholar, he is widely known for his translation projects. His contribution on *The Book of Ruth* in the *Word Biblical Commentary* will be published in 1995.